1986

A House Divided: Brothers and the Problem of Balance in the Stories of John Cheever

David Alan Raney
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

A HOUSE DIVIDED

Brothers and the Problem of Balance in the Stories of John Cheever

---

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

---

by

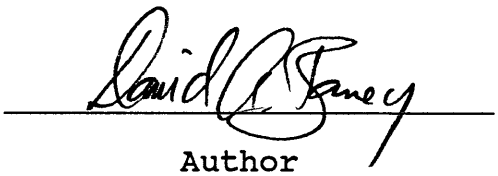
David Raney

1986

APPROVAL SHEET

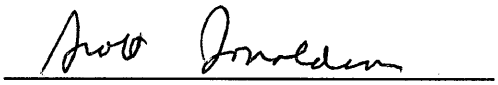
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts



Author

Approved, July 1986



J. Scott Donaldson, Chair

LeRoy W. Smith

Colleen Kennedy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer is indebted to Professor Scott Donaldson for his guidance and insight in overseeing this study, and to Professors LeRoy Smith and Colleen Kennedy for their careful reading and perceptive criticism of the manuscript.

ABSTRACT

John Cheever, in his fifty-year career as a published writer, examined few topics as often or as intently as the dynamics within families. Of particular importance to him was the relationship between brothers, a theme he explored in all but one of his five novels and in a number of short stories. Cheever's relationship with his own brother influenced his fictional treatment of the theme. Close study of the stories reveals two consistent focal points, both concerned with the need for balance: between obsession with the past and disregard of it, and between warring factions of the self.

A HOUSE DIVIDED

Brothers and the Problem of Balance in the Stories of John Cheever

Tolstoy in Anna Karenina maintained that "All happy families resemble one another; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." John Cheever, born two years after the Russian master died, spent much of his literary career examining happy and unhappy families, the circumstances in which they live, and the elements that drive wedges between family members or bind them together. Arlin Meyer has singled out as one of Cheever's consistent subjects "the family and the intricate web of emotional and moral concerns which compose it" (23-4). Among these concerns, one that Cheever explores in considerable depth in his fiction is the relationship between brothers. Some of the brothers he creates are primarily sympathetic and some are basically, even primordially antagonistic, but all are deeply felt and each develops in its own way two of Cheever's main themes: the struggle to balance tradition with progress (respect for the past with delight in the moment), and the improbable difficulty, given the catacomb complexities of the human soul, in coming to comfortable, enlightened terms with one's self.

The subject of brothers was clearly a highly charged one for Cheever. When brothers appear in his stories they tend to take center stage, and they figure prominently in his novels as well. Cheever's first novel, The Wapshot Chronicle (1957), for instance, traces in comic-picaresque fashion the wanderings of

teenagers Moses and Coverly Wapshot and their coming to terms with their family and the world. The Wapshot Scandal (1964) follows them into adulthood. In both books Moses and Coverly are presented as very close yet very different personalities -- Moses the capable, handsome one, Coverly more sensitive and diffident. Both surmount their problems in the earlier novel, though, whether by energetic effort or fortunate happenstance. In the Scandal, a more cynical and shadowed work than the generally sunny Chronicle, Moses takes on darker tones and veers into alcoholism and profligacy. The third novel, Bullet Park (1969), has no brothers per se but offers two main characters who function much the way Cheever's fictional brothers do. A number of critics have seen these characters (named Hammer and Nailles) as schematic variants on the brothers-in-conflict theme in Cheever.[1] In his fourth novel, Falconer (1977), the fraternal tension that governs much of Cheever's earlier work leads to actual fratricide -- the story takes place in the prison where the protagonist has been confined for braining his brother with a fire iron. Cheever's last work of fiction, the brief (one hundred-page) and elegiac Oh What a Paradise It Seems (1982), contains no filial conflict at all. Cheever seems by then (the year he died) to have gotten the theme out of his system.

Considerable critical attention has been paid to the relationship between brothers in Cheever's novels,[2] but relatively little to similar dynamics in his short stories. This is due in part, no doubt, to the opportunity which the longer

form affords for extended character development and interplay, and thus for extended exegesis. Book-length studies of Cheever's work are naturally weighted toward the novels -- some 1500 pages of narrative -- rather than toward the approximately 200 stories, with their more limited individual focus and field of play. Granted this difference between novels and stories, and the advantages of concentrating on the former in attempting a comprehensive survey, it remains a fact that Cheever made his reputation in the literary world as a short story writer. He published his first short story twenty-seven years before his first novel, and the intervening years saw nearly 120 of his stories in print. Cheever's story output decreased somewhat as he made his mark as a novelist, but the publication in 1978 of The Stories of John Cheever, a selection of sixty-one of his finest, reconfirmed in readers' and critics' eyes his mastery of the form. The themes of Cheever's novels play throughout his stories and often appear there first, worked out within tight fictional boundaries before being amplified in the novels.

In a way Cheever was first, last and always a short story writer. Disparaging criticism of his novels has often centered on complaints that they do not cohere easily, that they read too much like several stories glued together. Stanley Hyman, in a bruising review of The Wapshot Scandal, complained that too frequently a chapter ends with the kind of closure appropriate for "a short story, not for a chapter in a novel. It does not develop toward a final resolution; it is a final resolution"

(49). Cheever's experimentation with the novel's form makes such a charge -- with its implication of laziness or inability -- debatable, but it is true that Cheever's forte is the scene. Briefly but tellingly rendered, his scenes sketch character and place in a few strokes, make their point or punchline, and yield to another scene. They often do seem self-contained, independent.

It is interesting to note that in all of Cheever's fiction, short and long, with all of its families, only twice are brothers introduced who play no important role in the piece. This occurs in the stories "The Country Husband" (1954), in which Francis Weed's two sons and a daughter are introduced and as quickly forgotten, and "Percy" (1968), in which the narrator unobtrusively mentions taking "a walking tour of Germany with my brother" (as Cheever himself did) and lists among the reasons for detesting Percy's son that "He was extremely dirty-minded, and used oil on his hair. My brother and I couldn't have been more disconcerted if he had crowned himself with flowers" (S 638).[3] The brother then disappears for good. He seems an afterthought, perhaps a leftover from the Wapshot novels, whose brothers, like the narrator of "Percy," have an Uncle Hamlet and other eccentric relatives.

In one other instance, a pair of brothers fails to dominate a Cheever story, but in this case no central character upstages them. Rather, an entire family functions as the principal character, and every member of it plays a supporting role. In

"The Day the Pig Fell Into the Well," from the 1956 volume Stories, the Nudd family takes comfort in retelling, every summer at their mountain camp, the hoary family legend described in the title. The Nudd boys, Hartley and Randall, are introduced early on, but they take no greater part in the unfolding of either the story or the legend than do their sisters Esther and Joan, or their parents, or Russell, or Aunt Martha. This is appropriate, for the story's main concern is with the manifold changes that confront all of us and the hedges we make against accepting them, not with the dynamics between any two characters. By the end, Hartley has been killed in a war which, barring the fact of his death, is more "easily forgotten" than family memories, and Randall, with a wife and a son, ponders turning thirty-seven "as if the passage of time over his head was singular, interesting, and a dirty trick" (S 234). Still, the family meets as ever at the Adirondack camp, and the ancient story rears its head on schedule and is retold with variations old and new. Mrs. Nudd, who had been feeling morose at the family's loss of "their competence, their freedom, their greatness" with the passing years, is restored by the tale. The "good and gentle people who surrounded her" seem less like "figures in a tragedy" once the pig has fallen for the thousandth time into the well. All's right with the world -- but the narrator bends an ear to the wind blowing outside and finishes on a sad and knowing note: "The room with the people in it looked enduring and secure, although in the morning they would all be gone" (235).

Here no character is central. The development of one relationship at the expense of others would weaken the story's sense of a conspiracy of equals, a collective attempt to soften the effects of time by embracing a piece of the past in which each can play his part. Though the narrator and we (and the characters, of course) know that the winds of change do not stop blowing for their reminiscences, they welcome the chance to ignore it together for a while, and we don't begrudge them this. Cheever manages a story-within-a-story in which the same cast of characters features in both but none is raised to the level of protagonist, and this suits his thematic purpose well.

Elsewhere in Cheever, though, when brothers appear they dominate, and their relationship is most often one of conflict. It might be objected that in the novel and especially in the short story, gratuitous minor characters are a waste of creative time and energy and dilute the narrative flow. Why toss in a sibling who doesn't serve any purpose in the plot but merely injects the odd line of dialogue or skulks around the story's perimeter? The point has some validity, but it does not account for the scarcity of marginal brothers in Cheever's fiction. The dozens of families that we find there abound with children of minimal narrative importance -- yet, with the above exceptions, none of these are brothers.

Very often a Cheever story will center around the marriage itself, with the children as bit players, and one would expect the boy-girl children combinations to run the gamut. With the

noted exceptions, though, brothers simply do not play minor roles in Cheever's fictive world. One or more daughters turn up in "The Hartleys," "O City of Broken Dreams," "The Sutton Place Story," "The Pot of Gold," "The Wrysons," "The Swimmer," and "The Jewels of the Cabots." A single son fills out the family cast of "The Common Day," "An Educated American Woman," and "The Bella Lingua." Sister-brother combinations figure in "The Summer Farmer," "The Season of Divorce," and three other stories, and in several more there are vague references to unnamed children of still lesser stature: "his children," "my youngest son," and so forth. When he needs marginal children to round out a fictional family, Cheever makes them brother-sister or sister-sister. (Nowhere does he examine such a relationship in depth.) When he elevates a filial conflict to importance in a story, he invariably chooses brothers.

A likely factor in this dearth of trivial brothers, and one reason for the intensity with which Cheever invests them when they do appear, is the author's relationship with his own brother. Seven years older than John, Frederick Cheever was a major influence in his life and the object of both his warm affection and his icy resentment. Theirs could fairly be called a love-hate relationship; over the years it fluctuated between many shades of emotion.

Cheever was prone to reticence on the subject of the confluence of fact and fiction in his writing, and especially so where his brother was concerned -- even in interviews in which he

was effusive and eloquent on all other topics. In a 1969 interview with Annette Grant, for instance, Cheever remarks that his mother claimed to have read Middlemarch thirteen times, and when Grant recalls aloud that Cousin Honora in The Wapshot Chronicle did the same thing, Cheever admits to the connection and adds, "My mother used to leave Middlemarch out in the garden and it got rained on. Most of it is in the novel; it's true" (90). But the possibility that Frederick and John served as models for Moses and Coverly Wapshot in the same book never gets addressed, though Grant provides Cheever several openings.

Grant: One almost has a feeling of eavesdropping on your family in that book.

Cheever: The Chronicle was not published (and this was a consideration) until after my mother's death. An aunt (who does not appear in the book) said, "I would never speak to him again if I didn't know him to be a split personality."

Grant: Do friends or family often think they appear in your books?

Cheever: Only (and I think everyone feels this way) in a discreditable sense. If you put anyone in with a hearing aid, then they assume that you have described them....although the character may be from another country and in an altogether different role....

Grant: Do you think contemporary writing is becoming...

more autobiographical?

Cheever: It may be. Autobiography and letters may be more interesting than fiction, but still, I'll stick with the novel. (90-92)

The parallels between Sarah Wapshot and his mother Cheever would agree to when pressed, but he stonewalled on those at least as clear between himself and his brother and the Wapshot sons. At times, in talkative moods, he could be prompted to speak in general terms of Frederick, but he always balked at the suggestion that their relationship entered his fiction even indirectly. In an interview conducted by his daughter, Susan Cheever Cowley, for Newsweek in 1977, Cheever claims that "the strongest love -- not the most exciting or the richest or the most brilliant -- but the strongest love of my life was for my brother" (69). A year later, talking with John Hersey for a piece to appear in The New York Times Book Review, he repeats this almost verbatim and adds, "I don't suppose that I have ever known a love so broad as my love for my brother...[It] seems to have been a very basic love" (31). Hersey next broaches the subject of "the brother figure in your work" (alluding to the just-released Falconer), and Cheever turns unusually expansive until Hersey openly addresses the identification of fact and fiction. He then withdraws, slightly defensive, as if realizing he has said too much.

Cheever: ...The brother appears in a great many stories. I strike him in some, I hit him with sticks,

rocks; he in turn also damages me with profligacy, drunkenness, indebtedness, and emotional damage. ...

Hersey: A minute ago, you said, "I strike my brother." How close are you to your narrator?

Cheever: It seems to me that any confusion between autobiography and fiction debases fiction. (31)

One reason Cheever may have been reluctant to discuss fully his relationship with Frederick is that it soured dramatically from the "strong," "broad," "basic" bond of love that he usually chose to describe. The brothers were very close early in life, and inseparable for a time. After their parents' separation and John's expulsion from Thayer Academy at age seventeen -- which resulted in his first published story, "Expelled," in The New Republic the following year -- John and Frederick settled in Boston, where they lived together for four years. Frederick supported him financially while he tried to write, and by all reports they supported each other emotionally as well and were rarely seen apart. Whether a specific falling-out occurred which Cheever never brought to light or the relationship simply became stifling is not clear. Cheever remarked to Hersey that during this period he and Frederick were "extremely close -- morbidly close," and that it seemed to him that "two men living with such intense intimacy was an ungainly arrangement, that there was some immutable shabbiness about any such life" (31). On another occasion he referred to the Boston period as that "Siamese

situation" (Coale 3). In 1934 they separated, John moving to New York to try his fortune as a writer there. Cheever later said of the split, "I walked, so far as possible, out of his life" (Hersey 31).

Whatever the reasons for the initial fall from grace of the Cheever brothers, this and later complications had a powerful effect on John's fiction. Cheever used autobiographical materials freely in his work, and the matching of personal history to fictional incident, frequently an unrewarding task in criticism, is in his case often illuminating. The earliest and probably the clearest manifestation of John's relationship with Frederick is the story "The Brothers," included in Cheever's first collection, The Way Some People Live (1943). Only the fifteenth story Cheever published, it stands well above most of his early work. As Lynne Waldeland has noted, "The Brothers" shows a narrative movement and character development lacking in many of his first efforts; it is her choice as "the volume's most distinguished story...a polished and effective work of fiction" (John Cheever 23).

The story revolves around Tom and Kenneth Manchester, two New England brothers aged seventeen and twenty who after the divorce of their parents become deeply attached to each other, take a small apartment in "the city," and lead a "singular life...from which they jealously excluded the rest of the world" (WPL 156). Kenneth has a job; Tom does not. One of the rituals they have developed during four years of living together (the

same span as the Cheever's) is to visit, every Saturday afternoon, the farm of the widowed Amy Henderson and her daughter Jane. The farm, with its stone gates and tall maples and friendly dog and cool porch, is a welcome retreat from the city for the boys. The snake that enters their garden is the strong attraction Jane begins to feel for Kenneth: she likes Kenneth "so much more than Tom that she would have preferred him alone even to the company and the flattery of the two" (163). Her jealousy of Kenneth's every word and look grows, and is exacerbated both by his utter obliviousness to her changing feelings and by the brothers' tendency to act, apparently even to think, in concert. Sitting with the two of them over a drink, Jane "felt uncomfortably as if she were intruding into something... Above everything, she felt how accustomed the boys were to sitting across from each other at table with no one between them" (165).

The situation comes to its crisis when Jane, frustrated, enacts a lady-in-distress scene, feigning a sprained ankle to attract Kenneth's attention. Tom happens to see her "throw herself violently to the ground," then observes Jane's transparent happiness as Kenneth ministers to her, and realizes what is afoot. He is disturbed and thoughtful, but his uppermost emotion is not jealousy but dismay. The incident puts Kenneth's "complacency and...absorption" in a new light, and it occurs to Tom for the first time that "their devotion to each other might be stronger than their love of any girl or even than their love of the world" (169). When his attempts to leave Kenneth and Jane

alone together serve only to alert Kenneth to his absence, Tom decides to go away. Their closeness, he perceives, is too limiting, too easy and exclusive; he feels "a sharp thrust of responsibility for them both -- they must live and not wear out their lives like old clothes" (173).

Tom's leaving strips the comfort and familiarity from both brothers' worlds. Tom looks at the well-known road home and decides that "no road of Europe or any other country could have seemed stranger." Kenneth visits the Hendersons' farm again but sees the sky, grass, hills and trees "as if he had never seen them before.... He walked through the fields clutching involuntarily at the air,...looking around him like a stranger at the new, strange, vivid world" (175).

As mystified and distraught as the brothers are, this is without question an affirmative ending for Cheever, for the world has been thrown open again to Tom and Kenneth, without a safe, insular routine to distract them from its possibilities. The love of blue sky and water, of the wonders of creation and human intercourse, is pure Cheever; it infuses all his writings. To refresh one's perspective on the world at hand can only be good, even if it costs, as it does Tom and Kenneth, a painful separation. Cheever wrote in a 1960 story of a failed author who has "lost the gift of evoking the perfumes of life: sea water, the smoke of burning hemlock, and the breasts of women" (S 471), and this two-to-one distribution between the natural world and the human is perhaps a fair estimate of Cheever's devotions.

Again and again he sides with ever-renewing nature against the encroachments of modernity, against all that is suffocating or sterile, and he emphasizes the need to arm oneself for this battle with the kind of self-knowledge that comes finally to Tom and Kenneth.

"The Brothers" clearly has its foundations in John's time with Frederick in Boston -- the Manchesters are hardly "from another country" or in "an altogether different role" than the Cheevers -- but Cheever, in transmuting life into art, altered the role of the female somewhat. In the story, Jane acts as a catalyst for change, but she is not a source of competition between the boys. In real life, Frederick vied for a girlfriend of John's named Iris Gladwin, won her, and later married her. (Susan Cheever writes in Home Before Dark that Fred "co-opted" her [3].) Iris enters Cheever's fiction not as Jane Henderson but as Julia Deveraux in the 1935 story "Of Love: A Testimony." In that story, which, like "The Brothers," features the Henderson farm, the protagonist competes for Julia with a slightly older friend, and loses out.

"The Brothers" has some interesting parallels in fiction as well as in fact. Lynne Waldeland notes that Cheever's tale is reminiscent of de Maupassant's "Two Little Soldiers" (John Cheever 22), and it also bears a resemblance to one section of Thornton Wilder's The Bridge of San Luis Rey. In that 1927 novel, the identical twins Esteban and Manuel are, like Tom and Kenneth, inseparable. Their affinity is such that they develop a

kind of telepathy and have little need for words: "speech was for them a debased form of silence" (49). Tom and Kenneth are similarly taciturn -- like Hemingway characters, they rarely say anything that takes more than a line to print -- and though they banter with Amy and Jane, we learn that "if the brothers had been alone, they would have felt no obligation to talk or they would have talked intermittently about the world that was their own" (165).

Both pairs of brothers have known women, but only in casual arrangements irrelevant to their relationships with each other. Tom and Kenneth "both had their girls"; they "respected each other's privacy in casual affairs [and] would spend the night in a hotel" (165) if the other was entertaining. Esteban and Manuel too "had possessed women, and often, especially during their years at the water-front, simply, latinly" (51).

Into both relationships comes a woman who disrupts all of this. As with the Manchesters, the twins' "profound identity with each other," their "tacit, almost ashamed oneness" (48), at last shows a seam. In Bridge it is a dancer who signals the end of an era; Manuel falls helplessly in love with her, and Esteban, feeling the change instantly, wonders "why the whole meaning had gone out of their life" (52). He, like Tom, soon appreciates the situation and perceives that he must go his own way.

Though Wilder follows his brothers further than Cheever -- Manuel dies of a fever and Esteban attempts suicide; we can only guess what becomes of Tom and Kenneth -- the similarities in the

development and climax suggest that Cheever was familiar with the older work. Parallel phrases and word choices reinforce this impression, none more alike than the description of Kenneth wandering without Tom in "the new, strange and vivid world" and the sentence from Bridge: "All the world was remote and strange and hostile except one's brother" (49). Likewise, the lines "But at last the first shadow fell across this unity, and the shadow was cast by the love of women," and "Go and follow her...There's room for us all in the world," though they come from Wilder's novel (49, 57) would fit just as comfortably in "The Brothers." Cheever was a voracious reader, and he very likely knew the book that a decade earlier had made a reputation for Wilder.

"The Brothers" portrays a relationship whose insularity is rent by an outside force. Ten years later Cheever wrote of the wedge from within, of brothers divided not by cloying intimacy but by angry differences. "Goodbye, My Brother," from the 1953 volume The Enormous Radio and Other Stories, is by every measure a splendid piece of fiction. Any critic familiar with Cheever's work would rate it among the best four or five stories he ever wrote. In it Cheever tells of the Pommeroy family, gathered -- like the Nudds in "The Day the Pig Fell..." and so many other Cheever families -- at a traditional summer place to commune with old memories and assess the changes wrought by the previous year. This time the setting is a beach house at Laud's Head off the coast of Massachusetts. The protagonist is the narrator, whose first name we never learn, and the antagonist his brother

Lawrence, a "gloomy son of a bitch" who over the course of his stay does everything in his power, it seems, to weigh down the spirits of the others. He asks for the one kind of liquor not in the house, refers to his sister's new friend as "the one she's sleeping with now," pesters the cook about wages and unions, and forecasts the imminent demise of the summer house: "If you had an unusually high sea, a hurricane sea, the wall would crumble and the house would go. We could all be drowned" (6, 7). He pries up a shingle with his jack-knife in order to scorn the artifice by which the house has been made to look old, refuses to play tennis with the less talented members of the family, and declines to join them in any game, dance or other activity, preferring to ridicule such diversions from a distance as somehow immature or corrupt.

The denouement comes when the brothers take a walk on the sand and the narrator finds his enjoyment of the summer day and the beach ("a vast and preternaturally clean and simple landscape") marred by Lawrence, by "the company of his pessimism." He confronts him -- "What's the matter? Don't you like it here?...Come out of this gloominess" -- and Lawrence replies blandly that he has only returned to Laud's Head to say goodbye, will be selling his equity in the place and "didn't expect to have a good time," then follows this with an unasked-for catalogue of the family's failings:

> "Diana is a foolish and a promiscuous woman. So is Odette. Mother is an alcoholic.... Chaddy is dis-

> honest. He always has been. The house is going to fall into the sea." He looked at me and added, as an afterthought, "You're a fool."

The narrator, furious, strikes Lawrence from behind with a driftwood root, bloodying his head and driving him to his knees, then contemplates finishing the job.

> ...I wished that he was dead, dead and about to be buried, not buried but about to be buried, because I did not want to be denied ceremony and decorum in putting him away, in putting him out of my consciousness. (18-19)

He binds Lawrence's wounds, though, before leading him out of the undertow to "a higher place" and walking away. Lawrence and family leave the next morning, and the story ends with a paean to "the inestimable greatness of the race, the harsh surface beauty of life" to which the wounded brother has blinded himself. The final image is a justly famous one of the narrator's wife and sister -- Diana and Helen, a classical touch -- swimming in the sea, which throughout the story has provided for every character but Lawrence "the cleansing force claimed for baptism":

> I saw their uncovered heads, black and gold in the dark water. I saw them come out and I saw that they were naked, unshy, beautiful, and full of grace, and I watched the naked women walk out of the sea. (21)

"Goodbye, My Brother" has provoked various responses, but most readers agree that Lawrence is a thoroughly distasteful

character. Richard Rupp calls him a "stingy, mean-spirited, moralistic philistine" (247). One critic has admitted that he, too, would have struck Lawrence with a root, and John Irving defends the narrator's fury as motivated by "the best of all possible reasons: His brother [is] negative to his depressing core" (44). Frederick Bracher calls the blow from behind "the kind of reflex that makes one stamp on a spider or batter a venomous snake" (171). But there is more going on in the story than a "good" brother becoming fed up with a "bad" one and finding release in violence, more than "a biblical reversal in which an Abel-figure strikes Cain" (Waldeland, John Cheever 29). "Goodbye, My Brother" is the first important instance of a phenomenon that informs Cheever's fiction for the next quarter century: brothers as opposing sides of the same personality.

One clue to this undercurrent in the story comes near the end, after Lawrence has been knocked down and the narrator, standing over him, feels torn: "I would still have liked to end him, but now I had begun to act like two men, the murderer and the Samaritan" (20). Much earlier, though, and more subtly, the brothers are tied together by the form of narration. The "I" of the story seems at first a patient, long-suffering and completely trustworthy narrator, but as the tale progresses we realize -- especially on a second reading -- that a great deal of Lawrence's gloominess is not demonstrated but rather ascribed to him by his brother. Much of the cynical, defeatist attitude that we come to associate with Lawrence proceeds not from his acts but from his

thoughts, to which we have no access but the narrator's speculation.

Lawrence does, to be sure, say irritating and unnecessarily frank things in the course of the story, but the narrator is not entirely free himself of the invidiousness and disappointment with the world that seem to emanate from his brother. He intimates as much in the second paragraph of the story. "I teach in a secondary school," he says, "and I am past the age where I expect to be made headmaster." He remarks that Chaddy, another brother, "has done better than the rest of us," and later notes that Chaddy is also his mother's favorite. More importantly, the majority of Lawrence's dark opinions, in the last analysis, come to us straight from the "good" brother in a kind of narrative ventriloquism. At dinner the first night, the family drinks too much "through waiting for Lawrence," then eats a meal which the narrator "could see had been planned to please Lawrence. It was not too rich, and there was nothing to make him worry about extravagance" (5). Nothing up to this point has indicated Lawrence's loathing of extravagance, but we accept the statement and graft this feature onto Lawrence on the strength of the dependable narrative voice we've so far encountered. But details of this sort begin to pile up. The clouds at sunset have a light that "looks like blood," the narrator tells us, and when Mrs. Pommeroy gets drunk and makes a scene Lawrence remains on the terrace "as if he were waiting to see the final malfeasance." These are not Lawrence's observations. It is the narrator, too,

who goes on to label the restorative effect of swimming an "illusion of purification," yet immediately attributes this kind of thinking to his brother: "If Lawrence noticed this change...I suppose that he would have found in the vocabulary of psychology, or the mythology of the Atlantic, some circumspect name for it,...but it was one of the few chances for diminution that he missed" (10).

Here and throughout the story, the narrator displaces his own disgruntlement onto Lawrence, and he becomes increasingly open about reading his brother's mind. The transference is clearest in the traditional family backgammon game. Lawrence does not play, but watches silently, a scornful look on his face. The narrator both plays and tries to divine what his brother is thinking -- and, he says, "through watching his face, I think that I may have found out." For the remainder of the game, he reports these thoughts in full detail, all of them bleakly cynical and all, clearly, his own. An example: "His observations were bound to include the facts that backgammon is an idle game...and that the board, marked with points, was a symbol of our worthlessness" (12). Each of these perceptions, ostensibly Lawrence's, is similarly prefaced: "What interested him must be...I think that Lawrence felt...Lawrence would have noticed...I suppose Lawrence thought..." Throughout this running commentary Lawrence himself is silently observant; the narrator fills in the blanks, fooling himself that the family critique that emerges is not his doing. But in the process he calls Odette a flirt,

Chaddy over-competitive and his mother sentimental and interfering, well before Lawrence makes the almost identical set of accusations that drives him to such fury.

Lawrence is without question an unpleasant person, but he is also a scapegoat. He manifests a side of the narrator that the latter does not wish to acknowledge, for there is a great deal of the bad brother in the good. As Samuel Coale puts it, "For a man intent on denying the reality of Lawrence's gloomy vision, the narrator spends a lot of time recreating the depth, the imagery and the scope of that vision" (Cheever and Hawthorne 198). In order for the narrator's "lyric appreciation of the world" -- of fresh bread, sunsets, and sea air -- to win out over his darker, fatalistic side he must locate this portion of himself in Lawrence and try to destroy it.

Much of Cheever's own life was a similar battle between his natural ebullience, delighting in the world, and the sporadic bouts of unshakable depression which he labeled his "cafard" and which haunted him for years. Cheever remarked once that "Goodbye, My Brother" emerged from just such a struggle, that the two Pommeroy brothers in fact represent halves of himself as he alternately "rejoiced and brooded during a summer on Martha's Vineyard" (Hunt 273). Recreating in his fiction these inner conflicts, Cheever often let a brother-figure represent the dark side of a character, thus providing a dramatically satisfying stage for the exorcism of very personal demons.

In a great deal of Cheever's fiction we feel him striving

mightily to let light win over darkness, epiphany over cynicism, love over death. Sometimes he succeeds, and sometimes not. In "Goodbye, My Brother" he succeeds. Burton Kendle is correct in saying that the story "ultimately supports the narrator, whose love can justifiably soften or even distort the truth to make life attractive... Lawrence's omission of love distorts to the point of caricature and makes existence unendurable" (221). Though the narrator has not been entirely honest with himself, his lashing-out is a blow from the right quarter, a "denial of the death-wish in all its forms" (Bracher 171), and for that reason, for Cheever at least, it is admirable.

The central issue around which such struggles revolve in Cheever's fiction is often nostalgia, a matter on which he was ambivalent. Nostalgia sometimes seemed to him a glorious bulwark against the kind of mindless progress he detested, a reservoir for values and tradition; at other times he saw in it the potential for luxuriant stagnation, a refusal to grow. Not surprisingly, his characters share this ambivalence. The Pommeroy brothers take opposite sides, Lawrence the reviler of every tendency to cling to the past, his brother the defender of tradition as unifying and comforting. Lawrence eyes the artificial weathering of the beach house and scoffs, "Imagine wanting to live so much in the past that you'll pay men carpenter's wages to disfigure your front door," and the narrator remembers his comment years before that the entire family, indeed all of New England, had, "like a wretched adult, turned back to

what we supposed was a happier and a simpler time" (9). The narrator is indeed guilty of this -- he insists, for instance, on calling Lawrence "Tifty," a childhood nickname he dislikes -- and as elsewhere he shares Lawrence's opinion more than he'll admit, but for him the minor self-deception and "distortion of time" involved in nostalgia is trivial compared to its yield of love and security. Nostalgia provides, among other things, an escape -- if only temporary -- from the rush of the present, and as the narrator tells Lawrence, "We need a vacation, Tifty. I need one. I need to rest. We all do" (19).

The nostalgia/stagnation theme, present throughout Cheever's fiction, comes to perhaps its sharpest point in "The Lowboy," another tale of brothers. Appearing first in The New Yorker in 1959 and then in the 1961 collection Some People, Places, and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel, the story is in some ways a reworking of "Goodbye, My Brother." Again we encounter the "good" and "bad" brothers, and again the plot offers a conflict between the family past and the immediate present. The cynosure this time is not a beach house but a piece of furniture, a lowboy passed down as an heirloom by one Cousin Mathilda. The narrator, again unnamed, asks for the piece but describes his request as "halfhearted." His brother Richard's request is nothing of the sort: "he telephoned to say that he wanted it -- that he wanted it so much more than I did that there was no point in even discussing it" (S 405). Richard pleads, pouts, and bullies his way to possession of the lowboy, the

narrator resisting only briefly, and drives it away, lavishing on it the caresses of a lover.

When the brothers next meet, Richard has had the lowboy appraised and found it to be hundreds of years old, worth thousands of dollars, and his fascination with the "graceful, bowlegged" piece has become obsessive. "I sensed," says the narrator, "that Richard was in some kind of danger" (408). Richard has purchased a silver pitcher to place atop the beloved lowboy and a Turkish carpet to put below it, both chosen to identically match the arrangement he remembers from his boyhood. He is recreating and reveling in the past, and "while he never told me what happened next," the narrator says, "I could imagine it easily enough." Richard settles in front of the lowboy on a rainy night, alone in the house with a drink in hand, and the intensity of his longing for the past conjures up a parade of ghostly relatives, flamboyant and eccentric. A women's rights activist, a cigar-smoking aunt (reminiscent of "Percy") who paints nudes, a piano prodigy who kills himself with a paper knife, an alcoholic who sets the sofa on fire, a philandering uncle -- all visit Richard, who cannot speak or move but seems "confined to observation." He grows increasingly irritable. After a bitter, quarellsome dinner party with Richard's family, the narrator smashes all the heirlooms in his own home, exclaiming, "We can cherish nothing less than our random understanding of death and the earth-shaking love that draws us to one another... Cleanliness and valor will be our watchwords.

Nothing less will get us past the armed sentry and over the mountainous border" (412).

This patch of purple prose reminds us of the endings of both the later story "A Vision of the World" ("I sit up in bed and exclaim aloud to myself, 'Valor! Love! Virtue! Compassion!'...") and the 1954 classic "The Country Husband" ("...it is a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains"), as well as that of "Goodbye, My Brother." While it is not, perhaps, as persuasive as the latter two, it illustrates well the nobility that the narrator feels is involved in throwing over those vestiges of his past which bring no vitality to the present. He realizes that ideally we should exist firmly in the moment yet live comfortably with the past, appreciating our heritage without losing the sense of proportion necessary to seize the day. The effort of it all inflates his language, and an effort it is, for again the attitudes of the two brothers are not as separate as they initially seem. Richard is small in body and soul ("Oh I hate small men") and he is spoiled, insists the narrator. He emanates a "disgusting aura of smallness" as he performs, "perhaps for eternity, the role of a spoiled child" (404). The narrator's claims, as in "Goodbye, My Brother," are borne out to some extent by the "bad" brother's actions, but to dress the two in black and white is to miss the point, for here again the boundaries blur. It is not the past-conscious Richard but his brother who remembers that "thirty years ago one went into his room to play with his toys at his pleasure and to be

rewarded with a glass of his ginger ale" (404). (The narrator of "Goodbye, My Brother," too, recalls a petty offense involving his brother some twenty-five years in the past.) And as for smallness, the narrator describes Richard's rise to success with sarcastic exaggeration -- his is a "dazzling and resplendent respectability" -- and responds to his brother's claim that the lowboy is rightly his with the childish retort, "Everything has always been yours, Richard." Finally, he protests a bit too much that his desire for the lowboy is only half-hearted. "I did not really care, but it seemed that my brother did," he maintains, later adding, "after all, I could have kept the thing -- but I did not want it, I had never really wanted it" (408).

The point is not that Richard and his brother share some characteristics -- it would be odd if they shared none -- but that the narrator finds it necessary to cope with his own darker instincts by projecting them onto his brother, amplifying what already exists there, then proclaiming himself a staunch opponent of such alien motivations. It is even clearer in "The Lowboy" than in "Goodbye, My Brother" that this is going on -- the narrator, after all, admits to imagining the ghostly visitations that accompany Richard's descent into obsession -- and it is just as clear what is at stake: a proper appreciation of the world and of people as one finds them. In this the narrator of "The Lowboy," like his predecessor, triumphs, for despite his cunning tactics of displacement he honestly values personal relationships and glories in the physical world. His observations on love and

nature have the ring of sincerity and come, without question, directly from Cheever:

> "Some people make less of an adventure than a performance of their passions.... It was a spring day -- one of those green-gold Sundays that excite our incredulity.... considering the possibilities of magnificence and pathos in love, it seemed tragic that he should have become infatuated with a chest of drawers....it was affecting to see, in the summer dusk, [the] good and modest people of Boston...Oh, why is it that life is for some an exquisite privilege and others must pay for their seats at the play with a ransom of cholers, infections, and nightmares?"
>
> (404,5,7,8,11)

Neither Lawrence's rejection of the past nor Richard's wallowing in it is wrong in itself, Cheever says, but their resulting inability to enjoy the present, their lack of balance, is tragic. Family traditions and totemic objects are valuable only in their human component, only in relation to "the lives which they were made to enhance" (Rupp 247). When this life is drained from them by guilt, or rapacity, or woodenheadedness, or the sheer weight of time, then club the memory with a root, says Cheever, smash it on the kitchen floor, move on.

The last of the brother stories continues the struggle between past and present, but makes the present more patently a villain than before. "The Angel of the Bridge" (1961), collected in 1964's The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories, tells

of a man whose mother and brother are racked by phobias. His mother, who embarrasses the narrator by figure skating at Rockefeller Center, is deathly afraid of airplanes, and his brother is unable to breathe in an elevator, convinced beyond argument that the building will fall down around him. The first of these seems strange and sad to the narrator, but his brother's ailment he greets with cruel laughter: it all seems "terribly funny." It seems much less funny when the narrator himself is struck down by a phobia of bridges and is unable to make a crossing without sweaty palms, jellied legs, darkening vision and an irrational certainty that the roadway is about to collapse. He visits a psychiatrist, who laughs at him, and begins to go to absurd lengths to avoid the longer spans over the Hudson River. One day during an especially bad episode on the Tappan Zee Bridge, a young girl gets into his stopped car, a hitchhiking folksinger carrying a small harp. She sings him across the bridge and restores to him "the natural grasp of things.... blue-sky courage, the high spirits of lustiness, an ecstatic sereneness." The world now seems "marvelous and fair," and he considers calling his brother "on the chance that there was also an angel of the elevator banks," but decides that the improbable detail of the harp would discredit his story, and keeps silent. His brother remains afraid of elevators, and his mother, the story concludes, "still goes around and around and around on the ice" (497).

"The Angel of the Bridge" is important for two reasons.

Like "The Lowboy," which is based on an actual 1959 quarrel between the Cheever brothers over a family lowboy, the story is founded on fact: Cheever himself had a bridge phobia. This has the effect, first, of making his descriptions of the attacks terrifying to read, and, second, of lending extra interest to Cheever's unusually direct account of the rivalry between the story's brothers.

> There has always been a strain of jealousy in our feelings about one another, and I am aware, at some obscure level, that he makes more money and has more of everything than I, and to see him humiliated -- crushed -- saddened me but at the same time and in spite of myself made me feel that I had taken a stunning lead in the race for honors that is at the bottom of our relationship. He is the oldest, he is the favorite... . (492)

Again the oldest, the favorite, the more successful brother comes in for abuse by a central character, and one cannot but wonder whether Cheever's relationship with the older, salaried, athletic, better-favored Frederick provided the mainspring for the fraternal tensions that animate these stories.

Cheever's concern with the paralyzing alienation of modern America, too, is made more explicit in "The Angel of the Bridge" than elsewhere in his short fiction. The narrator says of his mother that she skates "as an expression of her attachment to the past," that "the older she grows, the more she longs for the vanishing and provincial world of her youth. She is a hardy

woman...but she does not relish change." Her fear of dying in an air crash expresses her broader aversion to the bewildering technology and breathless pace of the modern age: "How eccentric were the paths she took, as the world seemed to change its boundaries and become less and less comprehensible" (490-1).

The one thing that unites the story's brothers is a like reaction to these modern terrors, the narrator's reaction delayed somewhat to allow for a moment of recognition. Just prior to his own phobia attack, the narrator watches his brother walk across a New York street, and his viewpoint widens suddenly from scorn of a single person's frailty to contemplation of that person as possibly representative of humanity at large:

> He appeared to be an intelligent, civilized, and well-dressed man, and I wondered how many of the men waiting with him to cross the street made their way as he did through a ruin of absurd delusions, in which the street might appear to be a torrent and the approaching cab driven by the angel of death. (492)

The narrator himself becomes the next victim of these "absurd delusions," and Cheever again attributes the problem to the encroachments of contemporary culture. In a long paragraph he launches his most explicit attack on the tawdry American scene -- the canned music, the expatriated palm trees, "the Buffalo Burger stands, the used-car lots, and the architectural monotony" of the urban landscape. It occurs to the narrator that "it was at the highest point in the arc of a bridge that I became aware

suddenly of the depth and bitterness of my feelings about modern life, and of the profoundness of my yearning for a more vivid, simple, and peaceable world" (495). The highest point being the most dangerous, this is an apt analogy for the author's abhorrence of blind progress, of the peculiarly modern willingness to deify the present and regard the past as irrelevant. Modern man, Cheever says, is poised on a spidery bridge of his own making, cut off by too-rapid change from any sense of geographical or familial roots.

Cheever's ambivalence toward the past and his powerful, complicated feelings for Frederick emerge most clearly when his stories focus on brothers. Creating a protagonist and a brother who play off each other, moving together and apart, seemed to release something in Cheever. One senses in "The Brothers," "Goodbye, My Brother," "The Lowboy," and "The Angel of the Bridge" a close involvement with his characters and a personal stake in the outcome. This is not true of all of Cheever's fiction. In some stories, and at places in the novels, he lets his tremendous verbal facility run away with him and seems distant from his characters, uncommitted to them. (Malcolm Cowley wrote Cheever in 1971, "I've seen you losing patience with your characters for the last ten years or more.")[4] Like Fitzgerald, he occasionally relies on the sheer music of his lines to carry the day. In the brother stories, though, the emotions feel authentic, close to the bone. They pit Cheever's disillusionment with modern America against his wariness of

embracing a sepia-toned past that never was, his cafard against his natural exuberance, the impulse to cruelty against the need for love. These stories are a personal battlefield.

Morris Freedman has said that for the characters in one Cheever story, "Salvation lies in meeting the unavoidable horror head on, and engaging it with one's best talents, not obscuring it or fleeing from it" (392). The phrase "head on" is important, because Cheever's characters achieve only partial victory when they sidestep responsibility for their actions or blind themselves -- with liquor or drugs, or simply through willful ignorance -- to the need for any action at all. Cheever's brother figures are frequently stand-ins for their author, and through him for Everyman. Time and again Cheever draws them toward one of the ineluctable facts of adult life, that -- in Rupp's words -- "Balance is not easily won, but it is everything" (249). As they struggle with past and present, and with each other, they seem less separate entities than parts of one painfully divided self.

Notes

1

For examples of this view, see Chesnick 138, Coale (1) 200, Hunt 177, and Waldeland (2) 268.

2

The theme is discussed in Brennan 144, Coale (1) 194 and 198-9, Coale (2) 109-110, Didion 24, McElroy 75, O'Hara 21-4, and Waldeland (1) 44-7, 58.

3

Throughout the essay, the letter "S" preceding a page number will refer to The Stories of John Cheever, and the letters "WPL" to The Way Some People Live. The denotation will be used in the first page reference for a given story, and the page number alone in subsequent references.

4

Letter of May 14, 1971, in collection of Newberry Library, Chicago.

Works Cited

Bracher, Frederick. "John Cheever's Vision of the World." Critical Essays on John Cheever. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 168-80.

Brennan, Maeve. "Mortal Men and Mermaids." The New Yorker 11 May 1957: 142+.

Cheever, John. The Stories of John Cheever. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.

---. The Way Some People Live. New York: Random House, 1943.

Cheever, Susan. Home Before Dark. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984.

Chesnick, Eugene. "The Domesticated Stroke of John Cheever." New England Quarterly 44 (Dec 1971): 531-52. Reprinted Critical Essays on John Cheever. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 124-139.

Coale, Samuel. "Cheever and Hawthorne: The American Romancer's Art." Critical Essays on John Cheever. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 193-209.

---. John Cheever. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1977.

Cowley, Susan Cheever. "A Duet of Cheevers." Newsweek 14 Mar 1977, 68-73.

Didion, Joan. "Falconer." The New York Times Book Review 6 March 1977, 1+.

Freedman, Morris. "New England and Hollywood." Commentary 16: 4 (October 1953), 389+.

Grant, Annette. "John Cheever: The Art of Fiction LXII." Critical Essays on John Cheever. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 87-100.

Hersey, John. "John Cheever, Boy and Man." The New York Times Book Review 26 March 1978, 3+.

Hunt, George W. John Cheever: The Hobgoblin Company of Love. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.

Hyman, Stanley Edgar. "John Cheever's Golden Egg." The New Leader 3 February 1964. Reprinted Critical Essays on John Cheever. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 47-50.

Irving, John. "Facts of Living." Saturday Review 30 Sept 1978, 44-6.

Kendle, Burton. "The Passion of Nostalgia in the Short Stories of John Cheever." Critical Essays on John Cheever. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 219-230.

McElroy, Joseph. "Falconer by John Cheever." New Republic, 176 (26 March 1977), 31-2. Reprinted Critical Essays on John Cheever. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 74-7.

Meyer, Arlin G. "A Garden of Love After Eden." Cresset June 1979, 22-8.

O'Hara, James. "'Independence Day at St. Botolph's': The Wapshot Saga Begins." Massachusetts Studies in English 1980, 20-25.

Rupp, Richard H. "Of That Time, Of Those Places: The Short Stories of John Cheever." Critical Essays on John Cheever. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 231-251.

Waldeland, Lynne. John Cheever. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1979.

---. "John Cheever's Bullet Park: A Key to His thought and Art." Critical Essays on John Cheever. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982. 261-272.

Wilder, Thornton. The Bridge Of San Luis Rey. Aylesbury: Hunt Barnard & Co., 1969.

VITA

David Alan Raney

Born in Schenectady, New York, September 24, 1959. Attended Niskayuna High School in Schenectady and Cave Spring High School in Roanoke, Virginia, graduated 1977. Received a B.A. in English from the College of William & Mary in Virginia in May 1981. Accepted a graduate assistantship in the English department of William & Mary in the fall of 1984.